

⁷Ibid.

⁸Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. (New York: New American Library, 1966). ©1958, 1959, 1966 by Robert Nemiroff. All rights reserved. All subsequent references will be made in the text to this edition.

⁹Robert Nemiroff. “Comments on Thesis Proposal of Rose Subramanian, University of Hyderabad, India.” Unpublished Letter dated May 8, 1985.

¹⁰Samuel Beckett. *Waiting for Godot*. (New York: Grove Press, 1978) 6.

¹¹Samuel Beckett. *Endgame*. (London: Faber, 1958) 11.

¹²“Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry.” *American Theatre*. November 1984. ©1961, 1984 by Robert Nemiroff. All rights reserved.

¹³Steven R. Carter. “Images of Men in Lorraine Hansberry’s Work.” *Black American Literature Forum*. Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 1985) 161.

¹⁴Ibid. 161.

¹⁵Lorraine Hansberry. Unpublished early draft of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.

¹⁶Carter, 161-162.

¹⁷Lorraine Hansberry. Unpublished early draft of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.

Critique

Carter’s analysis of the varied ethnic backgrounds of the characters in this play demonstrates Hansberry’s commitment to a multiethnic society. Ethnicity is also clearly a factor in the complexity of the individual characters themselves, and in their interaction. Carter further gives a credible rationale (documented by quotations from Robert Nemiroff’s correspondence) for Hansberry’s choice of Sidney, a Jew, as the vehicle for her message.

Hansberry, however, does not really stress inter-ethnic issues here.

The conflict she portrays is that between *persons* who come from different ethnic groups, rather than conflict generated by a clash of cultures *per se*. Ethnicity is a subsidiary element in the play.

Carter has described Hansberry's earlier play, *Raisin in the Sun*, as one in which the protagonists "fight back as a group of individualists united mainly by their need to struggle against a common oppression and to seek a society more open to them and to other outsiders." In a sense, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* moves this struggle forward into the 1960s, mirroring the zeitgeist of that decade with its inherent contradictions. This was a period that gave rise to the concept of "self-actualization," and legitimated self-growth even at the occasional expense of the group. Most of the characters in *The Sign* reflect in one way or another absorption in the desire for personal change: Iris wants to succeed as an actress; David seeks recognition as a playwright; Mavis wants to grow intellectually; Gloria wants to quit "the life" and marry; Wally wants power. Hansberry's treatment of Sidney is particularly telling: Sidney wants to "drop out"; he wants to remove himself from the responsibilities of community and move to an isolated mountain top. He declares "Yes, I suppose I *have* lost the pretensions of the campus revolutionary, Alton. I do admit that I no longer have the energy, the purity or the comprehension to 'save the world.' " Only Alton is consistent, both in his ongoing concern for human justice and his blackness. When Iris accuses him of being phoney in his unswerving support of "the causes," Alton replies "I was born with *this* cause . . . I *am* a black boy. I didn't make up the game and as long as a lot of people think there is something wrong with the fact that I *am* a Negro—I am going to make a point out of being one"

Concomitant with the thrust for self-awareness, the 1960s spawned a vital renewal of communitarian sentiment whose expression ranged from the creation of intentional communities to the solidarity of whole-hearted participation in the many faceted Movement for social justice. It is the imperative for engagement in the latter cause to which Hansberry speaks.

The play can also be interpreted in terms of class and caste. Most of the main characters have in common their families' immigrant (and presumably proletarian) origins. The play's conclusion, in which Sidney is forced by conscience to abandon his yearning for detachment and fight corruption, illustrates the same theme that predominates in *Raisin*, i.e., the need to struggle for change in an exploitative, oppressive society.

Carter's perception of the characters in *The Sign* enriches one's appreciation of this play. His portrayal of Sidney's humanity, including its less admirable aspects, is particularly fine. His emphasis on "inter-ethnic" rather than personal issues, however, skews the meaning of Hansberry's work.

—Helen MacLam
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